

On Sino-Tibetan clausal noun modifying constructions as noun compound constructions

oral

Theme session:

Generalized Noun Modifying Clause Constructions (Convenor: Yoshiko Matsumoto)

Using naturally occurring data, this paper briefly discusses the history of the development of clausal noun modifying constructions in Sino-Tibetan languages, showing the development of a construction with a nominalized clause as the modifier in many ST languages, resulting in a nominal(modifier)-nominal(modified) structure, similar to noun compounds, though in the case of the clausal noun modifying constructions either element could stand alone as a referring expression to refer to the same referent. The paper then focuses on the relevant structure in Mandarin Chinese, showing that there is no grammatical restriction on the interpretation of the semantic relationship between the two elements (modifier and modified) in the construction. That is, unlike in Indo-European relative clause constructions, there is no “gapped” argument in the nominalized clause, and modified element does not have to be understood as an argument of the modifying clause, so the interpretation of the referent of the nominalized clause and its relationship to the head of the construction (if there is one) is left completely to inference from context and real world knowledge. It is argued that a constructionist approach, accepting the construction as is, where the construction has a meaning greater than the sum of the parts, and not talking about it using terminology from old transformational generative grammar such as “relativisation on the subject” or “relativisation on the object”, is more appropriate, particularly as the construction does not necessarily relate clearly to other forms, such as main clauses, in the way imagined in transformationalist approaches.

The lack of grammatical constraints on the interpretation of the relationship between the two elements in the construction is similar to the pattern found in noun compounds in many languages, so seeing the structure as a noun compound might be the explanation for the lack of grammatical constraints on the interpretation, though suggestions about the nature of grammatical constraints in Chinese in general point to it being a wider phenomenon in the language.